# THE BEAUTY AND THE SORROW

An intimate history
of the First World War

PETER ENGLUND

Translated by Peter Graves

PROFILE BOOKS

This paperback edition published in 2012

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street
London EC1R 0JH
*www.profilebooks.com*



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Minion by MacGuru Ltd
*info@macguru.org.uk*
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84668 343 5
eISBN 978 1 84765 430 4


This book was translated with the kind sponsorship of the Swedish Arts Council
KULTURRÅDET

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# 1

*Sunday, 2 August 1914*

**Laura de Turczynowicz is woken early one morning in Augustów**

What is the worst thing she can imagine? That her husband is ill, injured or even dead? That he has been unfaithful?

It has been a perfect summer. Not only has the weather been perfect – hot, sunny, wonderful sunsets – but they have also moved into a newly built summer villa, tucked away by the lakes in the beautiful Augustów Forest. The children have played for days on end. She and her husband have often rowed out on the lake during the short, white nights of June to greet the rising sun. 'All was peace and beauty … a quiet life full of simple pleasure.'

It has to be said that the simplicity of her life is relative. The large villa is superbly furnished. She is surrounded the whole time by servants and domestics, who live in a special annexe. (Each of the five-year-old boys has a nanny and the six-year-old girl has her own governess. The children are taken round in a special pony-trap.) They move in the society of the best noble families in the region. They have spent the winter on the French Riviera. (The journey home was fast and simple: European borders are easy to cross and there is still no need for passports.) They have a number of residences: as well as the summer villa and the big house in Suwalki, they have an apartment in Warsaw. Laura de Turczynowicz, *née* Blackwell, has a sheltered, comfortable existence. She screams at the sight of a mouse. She is frightened of thunder. She is modest and rather shy. She scarcely knows how to cook.

In a photograph taken a summer or so earlier we can see a happy, proud and contented woman, dark blonde, wearing a wide skirt, a white blouse and a large summer hat. We see someone used to a privileged and tranquil life, and a life that gets steadily better. She is by no means alone in that. Though there have been rumours of unrest and distant misdeeds, she has chosen to ignore them. And she is not alone in that, either.

So it really has been a perfect summer and it is still far from over. On

Sunday they are supposed to be holding a lavish dinner party. But where is her husband? He has been working in Suwalki for several days and should have been back yesterday, in time for the party. They held back dinner for him but he did not arrive. This is not like him at all and she is growing more and more concerned. Where can he be? She waits, watches. Still no sign. She has not been this worried for a long time. What can have happened? She does not fall asleep until it is almost morning.

Laura is woken by a violent banging on the window.

It is four o'clock in the morning.

She leaps up to quieten the noise as quickly as possible, before it wakes the children. She can see a figure down below the window. Her first, confused thought is that it is one of the servants on the way to the market and in need of something – money or instructions, perhaps. To her amazement she is greeted by the pale and earnest face of Jan, her husband's manservant. He passes her a card. The handwriting is her husband's.

She reads: 'War is declared. Come immediately with the children. Let the servants pack up what you wish to bring and come on later in the day.'

## 2

*Tuesday, 4 August 1914*

### Elfriede Kuhr watches the 149th Infantry regiment leaving Schneidemühl

A summer evening. Warm air. Faint music in the distance. Elfriede and her brother are indoors, at home at Alte Bahnhofstrasse 17, but they can hear the sound. It slowly grows louder and they realise what is happening. They rush out into the street and away towards the yellow fortress-like railway station. The square in front of the station is swarming with people and the electric lighting is on – Elfriede thinks that the drab white light makes the leaves on the chestnut trees look as if they are made of paper.

She climbs up on the iron railings that separate the station building from the crowded square. The music is coming nearer. She sees a goods train standing waiting at Platform 3. She sees that the engine is steamed up. She sees that the wagon doors are open and through them she catches a glimpse of reservists, still in civilian clothes, going off to be mobilised. The men lean out

and wave and laugh. Meanwhile the sounds of the music are growing louder and louder, ringing out clearly through the air of the summer evening. Her brother shouts: 'They're coming! Here comes the 149th!'

This is what everyone has been waiting for: the 149th Infantry Regiment, the town's own unit. They are on their way to the Western Front. 'The Western Front' – a very new term indeed, and Elfriede has never heard of such a thing until today. The war is about the Russians, isn't it? Everyone knows that. The German army is mobilising in response to the Russian mobilisation and everyone knows that the Russians are going to attack soon.[1] It is the threat from the east that is occupying the minds of people living here in Pomerania, and Schneidemühl is no exception to that. The Russian border lies less than a hundred miles away and the main railway line from Berlin to Königsberg runs through the town, which will presumably make it a self-evident target for the powerful enemy in the east.

The same thing is true, more or less, of the people of Schneidemühl as of the politicians and generals who, fumbling, groping and stumbling, have led Europe into war: information exists but it is almost always incomplete or out of date, and for lack of facts has been padded out with guesses, suppositions, hopes, fears, *idées fixes*, conspiracy theories, dreams, nightmares and rumours. Just as in tens of thousands of other towns and villages all over the continent, the picture of the world in Schneidemühl these days has been formed out of hazy and deceptive material of that kind – rumour, in particular. Elfriede Kuhr is twelve years old, a restless and intelligent girl with sandy-coloured hair and green eyes. She has heard people say that French planes have bombed Nuremberg, that a railway bridge near Eichenried has been attacked, that Russian troops are moving towards Johannisburg, that Russian agents tried to murder the Crown Prince in Berlin, that a Russian spy attempted to blow up the aeroplane factory on the edge of town, that a Russian agent tried to infect the communal water supply with cholera and that a French agent has tried to blow up the bridges over the River Küddow.

None of this is true, but that only emerges later. Just now people seem prepared to believe anything, the more unbelievable the better.

For the people of Schneidemühl, as for the majority of Germans, this is ultimately seen as a defensive war, a war that has been forced on them and

1 Which was quite true: before the end of the month there were two Russian armies on German territory.

which they have no choice but to see through to its conclusion. They and their counterparts in similar towns and villages in Serbia, Austria-Hungary, Russia, France, Belgium and Great Britain are filled with both fear and hope and, not least, with a warm and powerful feeling of self-righteousness because they are now facing a momentous struggle against the forces of darkness. A wave of emotions surges over Schneidemühl, Germany and Europe, sweeping everything and everyone before it. But what we perceive as darkness is to them light.

Elfriede hears her brother shouting and then she sees it for herself. Here they come, row upon row of soldiers in grey uniforms, short boots of pale, untanned leather, huge knapsacks and pickelhaubes with grey cloth covers. A military band is marching in front and as they approach the great crowd of people at the station they strike up the tune that everyone knows so well. The soldiers sing it and, when they come to the chorus, the spectators immediately join in. The song roars out like thunder in the August night:

*Lieb' Vaterland, magst ruhig sein*
*Lieb' Vaterland, magst ruhig sein*
*Fest steht und treu die Wacht, die Wacht am Rhein!*
*Fest steht und treu die Wacht, die Wacht am Rhein!*[2]

The air reverberates to the sound of drums, the tramp of boots, the singing and the cheering. Elfriede notes in her diary:

> Then the 149th marched up shoulder to shoulder and streamed onto the platform like a grey tidal wave. All the soldiers had long garlands of flowers around their necks or pinned on their breasts. Asters, stocks and roses stuck out of the rifle barrels as if they were intending to shoot flowers at the enemy. The soldiers' faces were serious. I had expected them to be laughing and exultant.

Elfriede does, however, see one laughing soldier – a lieutenant whom she recognises. His name is Schön and she watches him bidding farewell to his

2 'Dear fatherland, put your mind at rest, / Fast stands, and true, the Watch, the Watch on the Rhine!' 'Die Wacht am Rhein' had the status of a kind of unofficial German national anthem from the middle of the nineteenth century.

relations and then pushing his way through the crowd. She sees the bystanders patting him on the back, embracing him and kissing him. She wants to shout to him, 'Hello, Lieutenant Schön,' but she doesn't dare.

The music plays, a sea of hats and handkerchiefs waves above the crowd, the train with the civilian-clad reservists whistles and pulls away, and everyone in the crowd cheers, shouts and waves. The 149th will soon be leaving too. Elfriede jumps down from the railings. She is swallowed up by the throng and feels as if she is being crushed and smothered. She sees an old woman, eyes red with weeping, who is screaming in heart-rending tones: 'Little Paul! Where is my little Paul? Let me at least see my son!' Elfriede, standing there crushed in this jostling and jolting mass of backs and arms and bellies and legs, does not know who Paul is. Shaken, or possibly simply thankful to have something to focus on in this overwhelming confusion of images and sounds and emotions, Elfriede says a quick prayer: 'Please God, protect this Paul and bring him back to the woman! Please God, please, please, please!'

She watches the soldiers march past and a little boy alongside her sticks his hand pleadingly through the cold bars of the iron railings: 'Soldier, soldier, goodbye!' One of the grey-uniformed men reaches out and shakes the hand: 'Farewell, little brother!' Everyone laughs, the band plays 'Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles' and some of the crowd sing along with it. A long train, decorated with flowers, puffs into Platform 1. At a call on the bugle the soldiers immediately begin to climb aboard to the sounds of oaths, jokes and commands. A soldier hurrying to catch up with the rest passes Elfriede as she stands there behind the railings. She plucks up courage and stretches out her hand to him, shyly mumbling, 'Good luck!' He looks at her, smiles and takes her hand as he passes: 'Until we meet again, little girl!'

Elfriede's eyes follow him and watch him climb into one of the goods wagons. She sees him turn round and look at her. Then the train jerks into motion, slowly at first and then faster.

> The cheering rose to a roar, the soldiers' faces crowded in the open doors, flowers flew through the air and all at once many of the people in the square began to weep.
>
> 'Until we meet again! We'll be home with you soon!'
>
> 'Don't be afraid! We'll soon be back!'
>
> 'We'll be back to celebrate Christmas with Mum!'
>
> 'Yes, yes, yes – come back in one piece!'

And from the moving train comes the sound of a powerful song. She can only catch part of the refrain: '… in der Heimat, in der Heimat, da gibt's ein Wiedersehen!'[3] Then the wagons disappear into the night and are gone. Into the darkness and warm air of summer.

Elfriede is deeply moved. She walks home, choking back tears. As she walks she holds the hand the soldier touched out in front of her as if it contains something very valuable and very fragile. As she climbs the badly lit steps to the porch of Alte Bahnhofstrasse 17 she kisses her hand, quickly.

❁

Sarah Macnaughtan returns to London today, 4 August, after a long and enjoyable stay in the country. The summer this year has been unusually hot and sunny and there has been nothing to disturb the profound peace that she and her friends have enjoyed. (The news of the double murder in the Balkans, which reached them at haymaking time, was quickly forgotten, or repressed, or simply filed away as yet another of those regrettable but distant events that unfortunately occur from time to time.) She writes:

> Hardly anyone believed in the possibility of war until they came back from their August Bank Holiday visits and found soldiers saying goodbye to their families at the stations. And even then there was an air of unreality about everything, which rendered realisation difficult. We saw women waving handkerchiefs to the men who went away, and holding up their babies to railway carriage windows to be kissed […] We were breathless, not with fear, but with astonishment.

## 3

*Thursday, 20 August 1914*

**Richard Stumpf is copying a poem aboard SMS *Helgoland***

Richard Stumpf is deeply upset. Yet another declaration of war, yet another country allying itself with Germany's enemies. This time, Japan. The rulers in

3 '… at home, at home – that's where we'll meet again.'

Tokyo are among the first of a growing band of war opportunists who, in this uncertain and fluid situation, have seized the chance to grab something for themselves, usually territory. Japan has delivered an ultimatum to the Foreign Ministry in Berlin demanding the withdrawal of all German warships from Asia and the handing over to Japan of the German colony of Tsingtao.[4]

Stumpf's anger overflows and out pours the racist invective: 'Only these yellow, slant-eyed Asiatics would think of making such a shameless demand.' He is, however, convinced that the German troops in Asia will give these 'thieving yellow apes' a thorough thrashing.

Richard Stumpf is a twenty-two-year-old seaman in the German High Seas Fleet. His background is working class – he worked as an iron plateworker for two years before enlisting – but he is also a practising Catholic, member of a Christian trades union and an avowed nationalist. Like so many others he is overjoyed when war breaks out, not least because it means that Germany can finally settle accounts with the perfidious English: he thinks that the 'real reason' Britain has taken sides in the conflict is 'envy of our economic progress'. 'May God punish England' is a standard greeting by some members of the forces on entering a room; the obligatory answer is, 'He will punish them'.

Stumpf is intelligent, chauvinistic, inquisitive and prejudiced. He is musical and reads a great deal. His photograph shows us a dark, serious young man with an oval face, eyes close together and a small but determined mouth. On this particular day Stumpf is at sea, at the mouth of the River Elbe, on board the great battleship SMS[5] *Helgoland*, the vessel he has served on ever since enlisting.[6] That is where he was on the day war broke out.

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4 Tsingtao, transcribed as Quingdao nowadays, lies on a peninsula on the coast of the province of Shangdong and was ceded to Germany at the end of the nineteenth century in compensation for the murder of a number of German missionaries. (The German influence is still evident in that by far the best beer in China is brewed here.) Japan's unlimited imperialist ambitions on the Asian mainland had already led to wars with both Russia and China and this demand marked a further step in Japanese expansionist plans – under the pretence of fulfilling the duties inherent in the 1902 alliance with Great Britain. Japanese forces had been in a state of readiness to attack Tsingtao since the middle of August – that is one week before Japan delivered the ultimatum referred to above.

5 Seine Majestäts Schiff – His Majesty's Ship.

6 Launched in Kiel in 1909, the *Helgoland* was an incarnation of the pre-war naval race in that she was built as a direct response to the British HMS *Dreadnought*, the largest and most powerful battleship in the world at the time. HMS *Dreadnought*, with her

Richard remembers that the atmosphere was subdued when their ship came into harbour because no exciting news had reached them while they had been at sea – people could be heard complaining about 'all this fuss over nothing'. But no one had been allowed ashore and instead they had spent their time loading ammunition and unloading 'inessentials'. At half past five in the evening the signal 'All men on deck' had been given and they had all formed up. Then one of the ship's officers, holding a sheet of paper in his hand, had grimly announced that both the army and the navy were to mobilise that night: 'You know what that means – war.' The ship's band had struck up a patriotic tune and everyone had sung along with it 'enthusiastically'. 'Our joy and excitement was boundless and lasted well into the night.'

In the midst of all the cheering it is already possible to detect a notably asymmetrical aspect. Colossal energies have been released and seem to be dragging everyone with them. Stumpf, for instance, notes with some satisfaction that many radical authors who have made a name for themselves as sharp and persistent critics of the Wilhelmine age have now produced works of extreme and inflated patriotism. What has been swept away in this flood tide of high emotion is the question *why* they are at war. Like Stumpf, many people think that they know what it is 'really' about, believe they have discovered the 'true cause', but this 'really' and 'true cause' have already disappeared behind the fact that they are at war. The war already shows signs of becoming an end in itself and few people are still talking about Sarajevo.

Stumpf himself thinks that some of the propaganda against the growing band of Germany's opponents goes too far. Such as a vulgar postcard he has just seen in a shop: it depicts a German soldier putting an enemy soldier over his knee in order to smack his bottom, and he is saying to his waiting

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steam turbines, armour and heavy armament, was epoch-making: overnight she made all earlier armoured ships out of date and made the naval strategists of the world forget all budgetary restraints. SMS *Helgoland*'s armament was of a class with *Dreadnought*'s and her armour was, in fact, slightly heavier. (This was because German battleships were not intended to have the same range of operation as British ships and consequently some of the weight saved in terms of coal-carrying capacity could be used for extra protection.) With her twelve 30.5 cm guns she was the most modern ship in the German High Seas Fleet and she and her sister vessels *Ostfriesland*, *Thüringen* and *Oldenburg*, raised expectations very high – among the public, the admirals, her own crew and with Kaiser Wilhelm. Everyone knew that the expensive (and foolish) High Seas Fleet project was one of the Kaiser's favourites and the implementation of it in the years before the war is what set Germany on a collision course with Great Britain.

comrades, 'Don't push! You'll all get your turn.' And then there is the very popular jingle made up by street boys and scribbled in chalk on railway carriages carrying mobilised soldiers: 'Jeder Schuss ein Russ, Jeder Stoss ein Franzos, Jeder Tritt ein Britt'.[7] But other things move him deeply, like the poem by the popular writer Otto Ernst, published in the nationalistic paper *Der Tag*, which comments on the fact that Germany is now at war with seven countries. Stumpf is so taken by the poem that he copies it word for word in his diary. Two of the verses are as follows:

*O mein Deutschland, wie musst du stark sein,*
*Wie gesund bis ins innerste Mark sein,*
*Dass sich's keiner allein getraut*
*Und nach Sechsen um Hilfe schaut.*

*Deutschland, wie musst du vom Herzen echt sein,*
*O wie strahlend hell muss dein Recht sein,*
*Dass der mächtigste Heuchler dich hasst*
*Dass der Brite von Wut erblasst.*[8]

And the conclusion:

*Morde den Teufel und hol dir vom Himmel*
*Sieben Kränze des Menschentums,*
*Sieben Sonnen unsterblichen Ruhms.*[9]

The inflammatory rhetoric and excessively strident tone of the propaganda does not really signify a great deal. Quite the opposite. While there are undoubtedly conflicting interests involved, none of the problems is so

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7 'Every shot a Russian, every bayonet stab a Frenchman, every kick a Briton'. A further line was also added to the jingle: 'Jeder Klaps ein Japs', that is, 'Every slap a Jap'. Numerous silly rhymes of this kind were composed.

8 'O my Germany, how strong you must be, / how healthy right to the core, / since no one dared alone / but sought the help of six others. // Germany, how upright your heart must be, / O how brilliantly pure your rightness, / for you to make the most powerful hypocrite hate you / and the Briton to go pale with rage.'

9 'Kill the devil and grasp from the heights of heaven / the seven victory wreaths of mankind, / seven suns of immortal honour.'

insoluble as to make war necessary, and they are certainly not sufficiently acute as to make war unavoidable. This war only became unavoidable at the point when people considered it unavoidable. When causes are vague and goals uncertain, however, it becomes necessary to fall back on the bloated and honeyed words of propaganda.

Richard Stumpf laps them up and staggers around, intoxicated by the words, while SMS *Helgoland*, bulky and enormous in her grey warpaint, sways on the water and bides her time. The enemy has not even been seen yet and one can sense some impatience on board.

## 4

*Tuesday, 25 August 1914*

**Pál Kelemen reaches the front at Halicz**

In the beginning he had difficulty shaking off the feeling that this was just another exercise. It had all started in Budapest. Pál remembers how people looked as he loaded his luggage into a cab and how, dressed in his hussar's uniform of red trousers, blue tunic, pale-blue embroidered *attila* and high leather boots, he had to force his way through the dense crowds at the east station and elbow his way up onto the train to find standing room in the corridor. He remembers the weeping women, one of whom would have collapsed if a stranger had not caught her. Among the last things he saw as the train slowly moved off was an older man running after it, trying to get a last glimpse of his son.

After a hot but not too uncomfortable journey he had reported to his hussar regiment in Szeben – as usual. The man who received him there had not even looked at him, merely told him where he should go. Later the same afternoon, in bright August sunshine, he had gone to the mobilisation centre in Erfalu and then been billeted with a farmer – as usual.

After that there had been a series of routine activities: drawing his kit, including horse and saddle, payment of wages and a long – unbearably long – run-through of practical issues in a room that was so hot that people fainted as the stream of words just went on and on.

Then the picture began to change.

First there was a night march to the train that was waiting for them. Then a slow journey during which they were greeted at every station by crowds